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ABSTRACT

This guide describes the organization, administration, and maintenance of a student volunteer program designed to provide experiential learning to students and paraprofessional staff in rural human service agencies. The need for volunteer paraprofessionals in rural human service agencies, the benefits of a student volunteer program to both students and agencies, and the role and needs of paraprofessional volunteers are discussed in an initial section. Project HELP (Helping Experiential Learning Program), developed at the Stephen F. Austin State University, is described in detail including recruitment of volunteers, funding sources, and academic support. The organization of the program is presented including descriptions of administrative positions and responsibilities, agendas for organizational meetings, publicity suggestions, student recruitment, contracts for both students and agencies, and volunteers' work plans and job descriptions. Topics relating to program maintenance are explored, e.g., goal setting, benefits of the student coordinator's position, and the use of evaluative data. (WAS)

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Student Human Services Volunteer Programs for Rural Communities - A Practical Guide

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ABSTRACT

Volunteers are an important resource for human services programs. College students can serve in a variety of paraprofessional roles in agencies needing volunteers. Agencies gain through the influx of needed direct and indirect service personnel. Students gain through the benefits of experiential education. This paper describes how to organize, administer and maintain a student volunteer program. The examples provided are based on the experiences obtained while working with over 2000 student volunteers who have provided over 200,000 hours of service to twenty different human services agencies. The program guidelines and maintenance procedures are particularly relevant for volunteer programs to be developed in rural communities.

Student Human Services Volunteer Programs for Rural Communities - A Practical Guide

A problem within rural human service agencies is a shortage of direct service personnel. The quality of care provided to clients is dependent to a great extent on a low staff/client ratio. Many times funding for rural human service agenices is not adequate to ensure that enough paid staff are available to meet client needs. In order to solve this problem, alternative resources must be utilized.

Students interested in pursuing a career in the human services area often lack one very important quality--experience. Without experience to accompany the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, an education remains incomplete. The student who has been involved in experiential learning which complements academic knowledge is much better prepared to assume professional roles in human service agencies.

The need of rural community agencies for professional staff and the need of students for experiential learning can be met to their mutual advantage by the placement of student volunteers in paraprofessional roles within local human service agencies. The role of the volunteer as a paraprofessional has gained acceptance in the 1970's. Paraprofessional status means that the volunteer is trained to perform a variety of service functions.

The volunteer paraprofessional is capable of such tasks as case finding, intake screening, aiding clients in developing realistic attitudes and expectations, facilitating a positive relationship between the client and the agency professionals, and group reality counseling.

In recent years human service agencies have recognized the need for clients to maintain their identity. These clients are in need of increased self-awareness, interpersonal enhancement, and self-renewal which can be provided by increased personalization of services. In the future, the number of professionals available to meet this demand will not be sufficient, nor will the economy be able to afford such an increase. Consequently, more volunteers will be required to provide personalized services. Also, volunteers will, of necessity, occupy a broader range of positions.

While it is logical to assume that the volunteer paraprofessional is probably motivated toward helping others for humanitarian reasons, it must be remembered that he/she is human and, as such, desires job satisfaction and a personally rewarding life style. To this end, agencies and institutions will have to take care that social and personal reinforcement for volunteers increases over time. It should be remembered that the greatest asset of the paraprofessional volunteer, and his/her unique contribution, is the rapport that he/she can provide for the agency at the contact level. When volunteers move into more professional and administrative areas, they may lose some of this vital quality; and if the agency does not maintain meaningful

service roles for their volunteers they may eventually lose their usefulness. In a structured volunteer program, this possibility can be minimized.

A working example of the use of volunteer paraprofessionals in rural human services agencies is found in the Stephen F. Austin State University volunteer program, Project HELP (Helping Experiential Learning Program). By matching the service interests of the individual volunteer with areas of need within the community, placements which maximize the capacity of the volunteer to serve as a paraprofessional are located. The term community is somewhat loosely defined in this paper as several placements are in other towns 20 to 60 miles from the university. A placement is chosen which can best meet the operational goals and objectives of the agency and the educational goals and objectives of the students. In order to maximize the usefulness of the student volunteers, they are trained by the individual agency in the skills necessary to assume their paraprofessional role. Concurrently, the students receive valuable work experience, and the agency involved receives needed paraprofessional personnel.

The following pages describe the development, administration, and maintenance of this program.

Development

Project HELP has existed since the Fall of 1970. During the first three years of operation, students from psychology classes were recruited to provide assistance to three different human

service agencies--a state hospital, a state school, and a residential program for emotionally disturbed adolescents.

In 1973, the program was reorganized to include student volunteers recruited from the entire university. The number of agencies receiving volunteers expanded from three to six. Since 1973, the program has continued to grow and expand. More than 20 different agencies ranging from a state hospital to a head start program are currently participating in the program.

When Project HELP was initially established, financial, material and academic support for the program was quite minimal. Financial support did not include any cash funds allocated to the program. Material support was limited to donated supplies. Academic support consisted of isolated instances of faculty providing extra credit for volunteer work.

From these beginnings, the program has made dramatic progress. Project HELP has obtained support from a number of sources. For the first three years of operation, support was given by the Psychology Department. From 1973 through 1976, support was provided through a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. From 1977 to the present, support has been available through the federal agency ACTION via their program, University Year for ACTION. Currently Project HELP has an annual cash budget of over $150,000.00. Material support includes supplies, space, phones, and other needed back up. Academic support includes over ten different courses tailored to provide training and supervision matched to the student's service learning placement.

From its inception, the purpose of Project HELP has been to provide an experiential supplement to classroom instruction while simultaneously providing needed personnel to rural human services agencies. Since the initiation of Project HELP, over 2000 students have provided more than 200,000 hours of service to human service agencies in this rural area. This service has resulted in benefits to the agencies, to the persons in need, and to the volunteers themselves.

Administration

Administrating Project HELP involves persons with three basic job descriptions. In order to understand the administrative process, it is necessary to see how these different job titles interrelate. The faculty supervisor is a professor who takes ultimate responsibility for all volunteer activities. Second, the program director, usually a graduate assistant, is responsible for the paperwork and the general direction of the program. Third, a number of program coordinators, usually juniors or seniors who have previously volunteered, assist in the administrative duties. Program coordinators, in addition, make the initial contact with prospective volunteers and act as a liaison between the user agency and the student volunteer and between the agency and the program director or faculty supervisor.

The actual organization of the volunteer program begins one week before the semester starts. At this meeting the faculty supervisor and the program director discuss with the program coordinators the rationale for volunteering, the service interests

of the program coordinators, and opportunities at the various agencies. Based on this discussion, the faculty supervisor assigns the program coordinators to the different agencies. When assignments have been completed, the program coordinators formulate plans to contact their respective agencies by the next meeting. The program director makes notes of the discussion and compiles a list of agencies, coordinator's addresses and telephone numbers, and the contact persons at each agency. The second meeting is scheduled for the first week of the semester.

During the course of the second meeting, time is allotted for discussion of the results of the coordinators' initial contacts with their agencies. Discussion should include information about the agency's facilities, volunteer needs, and the contact person who will be at the organizational meeting. Also, the program director will supply the results of initial contacts with the agencies and university department heads.

The faculty supervisor then determines the date and time of the large organizational meeting. This meeting is usually held in the evening during the third week of the semester. At the large organizational meeting, the prospective student volunteers have the opportunity to visit with the coordinators and agency representatives. When the date is set, the faculty supervisor selects a publicity committee for the purpose of advertising the meeting. Committee members plan on contacting the radio stations, the local television stations, and the local newspapers. In the past, these communication media have given valuable assistance through newspaper articles, 30 second spot radio announcements,

and video tape interviews with the faculty supervisor during television newscasts. In addition, students are assigned to construct posters and flyers.

The program director assigns the coordinators several different classes in which to deliver recruitment presentations. Prior research has shown that best results are obtained by using two recruiters per class or organization. The program director goes over the format of the class presentations with the coordinators and schedules one or two practice sessions with them. Ideally, these presentations should be about 15 minutes in length. The format of these presentations should include an introduction of speakers and of the program in general, a brief description of the agencies, and the opportunities and rationale for volunteering. The recruiters stress the need to come to the organizational meeting, that no specific commitment will be required at the organizational meeting, that volunteering is a very meaningful educational experience that may aid the volunteer in acquiring a job, and that transportation can and will be arranged for volunteer workers to the various agencies.

By the second week of the semester when the third meeting is held, all publicity initiatives should be completed; and all posters and flyers should be distributed. Discussion is centered around finalizing recruitment plans. Recruitment should not be limited to classes but should include sororities, fraternities, service organizations, and religious groups.

At this meeting the program director presents the agenda of the organizational meeting which will include an assignment of rooms for the various agencies. This allows prospective volunteers to meet with agency personnel in small groups to discuss the volunteer opportunities which are available at that particular agency.

The importance of the organizational meeting cannot be over-emphasized. During the organizational meeting, agency representatives deliver brief presentations to the prospective volunteers. If all the publicity and recruitment measures have gone well, 300 or more people usually attend the "Big Meeting," but the number who will actually volunteer will depend upon the presentations by the agencies' representatives. Therefore, it is important that the meeting be well structured and that each agency be supportive of each other agency.

The Big Meeting is held in a large auditorium capable of sitting 300 people, and additional rooms (one for each agency) are provided for the individual meetings which follow the initial presentations. Agencies are expected to make short, positive speeches of about five minutes. In order to give time to each agency, speeches must not be longer than five minutes.

After the first segment of the meeting is over, the agency representative and program coordinator meet with interested individuals in their assigned rooms. The program coordinators are responsible for distributing and collecting volunteer application forms, carpool sheets, and maps. They also explain the location and function of the Project HELP office. In

addition to answering any questions posed by the volunteers, the program coordinators and the agency representatives set a date for an orientation session at the agency and organize car pools to the orientation session.

After the orientation session, each volunteer enters into a Contract with the agency. Each party to the Contract agrees to assume certain obligations. The agency assumes the responsibility for providing a placement through which experiential learning can take place. Additionally, the agency agrees to provide a specified amount of time of individual supervision/direct instruction by a member of its professional staff. The volunteer assumes responsibility for providing direct service to the agency and the community. Additionally, the volunteer agrees to contribute a specific amount of time to the agency.

In order to guarantee the development of a maximally effective role within the agency, the student devises a Work Plan. The Work Plan provides details concerning the volunteer's work situation. Two basic areas are covered in the Work Plan: (1) it describes the goals and objectives of the placement; and (2) it describes the specific educational qualifications or requirements necessary for the fulfillment of these goals and objectives.

After the Contract and the Work Plan have been developed and demonstrated their utility over a specified period of time, a Job Description is formulated. The Job Description describes in more detail the specific goals and objectives of the agency placement.

In the Job Description, each service goal is followed by a number of performance objectives. These performance objectives are more specifically stated than the goals and serve as methods for accomplishing the service goals. By delineating these, the volunteer details specific actions which will be taken to achieve the goals and objectives mutually agreed upon by him/herself and the agency.

By the use of Contracts, Work Plans, and Job Descriptions, the role of each volunteer is clearly defined. By the cooperative designation and maintenance of these agreements, the volunteers are able to maximize their effectiveness as paraprofessionals within the human services delivery system.

Maintenance

To maintain a volunteer program, certain goals must be set. These are: (1) an open line of communication must be maintained with the placement agency; (2) information and consultation must be supplied to the volunteer before, during, and after the volunteer experience; (3) feedback and information pertaining to the needs of the agency's clients must be obtained; (4) constant efforts must be made to improve the quality and effectiveness of the program; and (5) the volunteer program must become as self-sufficient as possible.

In order for Project HELP to fulfill these objectives, the undergraduate psychology curriculum was expanded to include Psychology 499, Practicum in Community Psychology. Students enrolled in this course serve as the program coordinators

for the agencies involved in the program. The use of student volunteer-coordinators has proven to be beneficial to both the agencies and the volunteers. The coordinators are required to work at their respective agencies in order that an open line of communication between the agencies and Project HELP is maintained (Goal 1). This requirement also fulfills Goal 2 by allowing the volunteers to have frequent contacts with their coordinators. The use of coordinators has yielded numerous positive results. Problems with volunteers' assignments, carpools, or any of the agency's problems can be dealt with immediately because the coordinator is alerted quickly to the problem.

The various advantages to the student coordinator have become evident as the program has expanded. The coordinators gain valuable experience by organizing the volunteer program and in working with the agencies and volunteers. They also gain insights into the way in which both state-supported and independent agencies operate. Through the weekly meetings with the faculty supervisor, program director, and other coordinators, they are able to share their experiences, to learn from each others' insights, and to provide valuable liaison between the program director and/or faculty supervisor and their assigned agency. The job of coordinator requires independent thinking, planning, and much responsibility.

The coordinators are constantly involved in tasks which simultaneously serve as feedback mechanisms concerning agency needs (Goal 3) and evaluative methods designed to improve the quality and effectiveness of the program (Goal 4).

The simplest of these is the weekly record of volunteer hours that each coordinator keeps on their respective volunteers. The monthly reports submitted to the agencies and the program director provide easily visible utilization data. Also on a monthly basis, the agencies are asked to fill out an evaluation rating sheet on the coordinator assigned to them.

At the end of each semester, the coordinators obtain both qualitative and quantitative feedback from each volunteer during an individual assessment meeting. During these sessions, feedback is gathered on such topics as the perceived helpfulness of both the agency and the Project HELP administrative staff, the volunteers' perception of their own worth to the clients with whom they worked, and the volunteer's idea of whether it was a worthwhile experience. During this same time period, the agencies are contacted by the program director and asked to provide quantitative and qualitative feedback about the program coordinator assigned to them, the general quality of their volunteers, and both the positive and negative aspects of the entire program.

The quantitative data is analyzed by the program director. Then the program director and the faculty supervisor examine all the evaluative data and incorporate the results into the plans for next semester's program. Only by gathering and utilizing these types of evaluative data can a truly effective volunteer program be developed and maintained.

One of the major maintenance goals of Project HELP is self-sufficiency (Goal 5). The development of Psychology 499, Undergraduate Practicum in Community Psychology into a course with capacity enrollment was a major step in this direction.

Since this course has been so enthusiastically received by student volunteers, the Psychology Department has included another course, Psychology 399, Practicum in Mental Health Services, in its curriculum. This course provides one hour of lecture each week which covers basic mental health concepts, human service delivery methods, and problems inherent in rural areas. Individual volunteer field placements are made where the student may apply the lecture materials to direct service applications as well as understand the problems and difficulties within human service agencies.

The use of student volunteer paraprofessionals has proven to be a viable answer to the problem of insufficient personnel in rural human service agencies while simultaneously providing valuable experiences to the volunteer. By having a well-organized and structured program, many of the problems often found in volunteer programs can be avoided.

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